

## One of Bard's most complex figures comes to Prescott stage

By RONALD ZAJAC  
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PRESCOTT — "Hath not a Jew eyes?"

So begins one of the most oft-quoted passages of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

The eloquence and poignancy of that passage alone is one of the very reasons Shylock remains one of the Bard's most charged characters.

It was an opportunity David Adams could not resist.

The Vancouver-based actor, whose credits include the Shaw Festival, *Phantom of the Opera* and appearances on TV's *The X-Files* and the film *Little Women*, is in Prescott to take on the role of Shylock for the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival's sixth season.

"It's such an iconic part that the opportunity to play it doesn't come very often," Adams said Friday morning during the festival's media call at the Kinsmen Amphitheatre.

"People have been saying these lines for over 400 years and I'm getting to say them. It's very humbling."

This year's festival features *Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*, running on various nights at the riverfront amphitheatre from July 12 through August 16.

Adams, 52, figures he's the right age and weight to portray Shylock, one of Shakespeare's most-discussed figures.

With its portrayal of the Jewish moneylender Shylock, *Merchant of Venice* has been the centre of a debate about anti-Semitism.

Some argue Shylock is meant as an unsympathetic portrayal of Jews (the Nazis even used the play as propaganda), while others say the character is in fact sympathetic.

Such complexity in what is considered a romantic comedy is another



Shylock (played by David Adams, left), speaks to Salerio (Keith Bennie) and Solanio (Michael MacDonald) in a scene from *The Merchant of Venice* performed for the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival media call on Friday.

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testament to Shakespeare's depth.

For his part, Adams feels playing Shylock at either end of the spectrum — as a pure villain or a sympathetic victim — falls short of the mark. He also thinks Shylock's Jewishness is the wrong prism through which to see the character.

His aggressive pursuit of justice, as embodied by the letter of the law, is Shylock's central flaw, notes Adams, and it's a behaviour that is not bound to his Jewishness.

The company's artistic director, Ian Farthing, who is directing

*Merchant of Venice*, does not believe Shakespeare wrote an anti-Semitic play. The very eloquence of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes" monologue attests to this.

"I think our job is simply to tell the story," said Farthing, adding circumstances propel Shylock's character to "the point where a man is pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed and it snaps."

Like his fellow Shakespeare Festival actors, Adams is doing double duty in this two-play lineup, portraying both the usurping Duke

Frederick and his victim, Duke Senior, in the comedy *As You Like It*.

Getting immersed in the language of Shakespeare for a month is a rare privilege, said Adams.

"For an actor, it's nirvana," he said. Alix Sideris, who plays Rosalind in *As You Like It*, is equally thrilled with getting the role.

"This is one of the most ... incredible female roles in the Shakespearean canon," she said.

"It's like the female Hamlet, only comic."

In fact, director Craig Walker (who

directed last year's *Romeo and Juliet*), notes Shakespeare wrote *As You Like It* very close in time to *Hamlet* and the courtly heroine is presented with a similar scenario: an uncle who has usurped a father's throne.

Hamlet, notes Walker, responds to this injustice with the wrong course of action, leaving the stage littered with bodies at the end.

By contrast, Shakespeare makes Rosalind both female and comic perhaps to suggest there is a better way, and that the predominantly male audience members of the time could learn something from the gentler natures of women, said Walker.

*As You Like It* is one of Shakespeare's classic "Green World" plays, where a forest setting provides healing to the flawed world of the benighted aristocrats who are left wandering its paths.

For Quincy Armorer, who plays Rosalind's lover Orlando, the amphitheatre is an ideal stage.

"It's great to do a play like that in the actual outdoors," said Armorer.

The amphitheatre is a great place to bring Shakespeare's work to the people, as it should be done, with an exchange of energies between performers and audience, said Sideris.

"Sometimes Shakespeare can be done from a mountain top," she said.

"What this was meant to do was be right at the bottom of that mountain."

*The Merchant of Venice* runs from July 16 to August 16, while *As You Like It* runs July 12 to August 16.

Performances run from Tuesday through Saturday at 7 p.m., with 2 p.m. matinees on Saturday. Single tickets are \$22 each, or \$16 for students and seniors.

For more information, call 925-5788, or go online to [www.stlawrenceshakespeare.ca](http://www.stlawrenceshakespeare.ca)